"Happy to work ourselves out of a job": An insight into the UK Government's counter terrorism communications unit

This post is long overdue, but I wanted to make sure I had time to write it because it concerns a potentially sensitive subject.

At the end of October, Dr Andrew Garner from the UK Government's Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU), very kindly gave a talk at King's College, London.

He pointed out that his presentation reflected his own views as an analyst and anthropologist and did not represent an official government position.

These are my notes from the talk. It was very wide-ranging, so in some cases I have slightly reordered what Garner said on the day to make this post more coherent.

What is RICU?

RICU is a cross-government strategic communications unit on counter-terrorism. It reports to Communities and Local Government, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Home Office. The unit was announced in March 2007 and began with 1-3 people in the first month. Now there are between 35-38 people working for the Unit.

Why was it set up?

Garner said the events of 7 July 2005, when four suicide bombers attacked London's commuters, represented a sea change in government:

> "It's difficult to underestimate the shock wave that caused in government, particularly the fact that it was an attack in the UK by UK nationals."

Garner noted that the alleged transatlantic aircraft plot (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4778889.stm), which was broken up by police in August 2006, provided additional impetus to the establishment of the Unit. It became apparent there was a need for a more joined up communications policy in government.

Garner showed us images and snapshots from websites relating to terrorism. He pointed to the language used and emphasised that there was a significant debate about whether the UK was involved in a war. He recognised that there were mistakes by official government reactions to the London bombings:

> "The language that was used at the time made most of the Muslim population in the UK feel as though they were to blame and they were actually the people who were responsible in one form or another."

In an effort to get government communications right RICU was set up in 2007, as part of the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT) within the Home Office.

What's the threat today?

The Security Service (http://www.mi5.gov.uk/output/Page549.html) is currently tracking an estimated 2,000 suspects within the UK as part of 200 terrorist networks. In 2008, 45 people were convicted, of which 19 pleaded guilty, under terrorism legislation.

RICU's Strategy

1. Expose the weaknesses of extremist ideologies and brands. 2. Promote and support credible alternatives. 3. Strengthen and protect UK government through communications.

RICU's Key Messages

Terrorism is a real and serious threat to us all. Terrorists are criminals and murderers. They attack the values that we all share. We all need to work together to tackle the terrorist challenge.

Combatting Al-Qaeda's 'single narrative'

Garner gave a brief overview of the theory that Al-Qaeda is successful because it uses a single narrative. The single narrative is a method used by core Al-Qaeda and their affiliates to win over supporters.

Structuring a story of fundamental grievances that virtually anyone can plug into, they posit themselves and the greater Ummah as the answer.

They also highlight the necessity of action. Although Garner was not convinced that the single narrative theory was a conclusive definition of the problem, he said that part of RICU's role was to counter this ideology.

The Challenges for RICU

In order to achieve this, Garner said the Unit and government more generally were trying to change society:

> "The fundamental challenge of this is that we, RICU, government, are effectively trying to change how a society or a segment of society operates in certain specific ways that are illegal."

Garner identified the aim as shaping perceptions and behaviour at three levels. At a primary level among the general population. At a secondary level in targetted vulnerable groups, and at a tertiary level among those who are already 'radicalised'. (Though Garner noted there were problems with using this word).

The Unit also wants to build community cohesion and encourage inclusivity to prevent backlashes from right wing extremists. While some might be concerned by what RICU is trying to achieve, Garner pointed out that in other areas of government, such as health, efforts to bring about societal change are readily accepted:

> "...in some ways, this is similar to other kinds of intervention that government undertakes, that are far less contentious and probably supported by the vast majority of population."

Garner said there was a current debate within RICU about when was the best time to intervene to prevent terrorism – is it better to have early, general interventions by government or does it make more sense to have focused interventions when a problem emerges?

RICU's Research and Analysis

A recent report (http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/prevent/downloads/prevent.pdf) (pdf) by the Audit Commission into preventing violent extremism at a local level highlighted that:

> "There is a lack of shared national and international research on what causes or contributes to individuals becoming violent extremists. This is needed to develop effective preventative measures."

Accessing and overseeing more research was one of Garner's main concerns. He said RICU needed to understand the audience they were trying to reach and the effects of different forms of content.

He noted, for example, that "if government uses the word jihadist or islamist, what is heard is, 'you are attacking Muslims'". RICU is undertaking research in the following areas:

> Youth segmentation Perceptions of UK in Pakistan Mind-mapping across the UK population Counter Terrorism message testing Media consumption Online behaviours

Future projects include:

1. Credible voices
2. Word of mouth and trust
3. Blogging and social networking – "more a twinkle in our eye but we know that it's something we need to get done."

Garner's Final Thought

> "One of the things that we also think we are getting out of the current tranche of research, is the idea that when we get it right, when we, government more broadly, and when we, RICU specifically, get it right, no one notices. That might be a problem for us in terms of our careers but actually in terms of the big aim, I'm happy to not be noticed."

At the end of the session, I asked if RICU is trying to influence the media, and if it isn't how is this all going to work. Is RICU expecting to get its messages across unmediated on the Home Office website?

Tomorrow I'll put up a post (https://www.frontlineclub.com/blogs/danielbennett/2008/11/is-ricu-trying-to-influence-the-media.html) with Dr Andrew Garner's reply to that question.

Update 27/11/08: Ok, I didn't quite make "tomorrow" – I've been at a Future of Journalism Conference (http://mediatingconflict.blogspot.com/2008/11/future-of-journalism-conference-at-bbc.html) and then Mumbai happened, but it will be up soon (https://www.frontlineclub.com/blogs/danielbennett/2008/11/is-ricu-trying-to-influence-the-media.html).